Architects of a Failed World

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If one should find oneself hurtling into the upper atmosphere of an unidentified planet in an unknown universe, panic is generally agreed to be the customary and, indeed, appropriate response — particularly if one is thusly plummeting with no way to slow oneself down. Curiously, however, Abraytha Janus Colefia's instincts were presently declining to engage in any such emotional displays, as if refusing to acknowledge what the higher functions of his consciousness has recognised as his current predicament.

Perhaps his subconscious, having failed to react with the requisite lightning speed, was now too embarrassed to contribute at all. Abraytha and Xiantio, who was still clinging tightly to him, had been falling for some time; they had fallen so very far now, through the Void which lay between all worlds, through the lesser darkness of a Universe they did not even know and now into the atmosphere of this unknown world.

And one thing was certain; Abraytha's wings would not be enough to still a fall from atmospheric heights. Equally unfortunate and equally unassailable was the fact he had never learnt the art of true levitation, a common lacuna among those who natively possess simpler means of ascension.

Yet his instincts told him nothing, and no news, generally, was good news. Perhaps there was nothing for it but to trust that there had to be a reason for his unaccountable calmness; far from shirking on the job, it must be the case that his subconscious knew something he didn't, which justified this lack of response. With little else to hold onto but that trust, Abraytha had no choice but to accept it, and focus his powers of concentration on clinging fast to the *other* things he must, quite imperatively, hold onto, which was to say, Xi.

It was not long before this conclusion was vindicated as Abraytha's reason caught up to what his bones had sensed all along: though the planet below seemed quite immense, its gravitational pull was far weaker than it had ought to be. Thus it was, happily, that contrary to ordinary expectations, no atmospheric burnup was induced by the pair's descent, and no great fire reddened that alien sky. Instead, they passed at a leisurely pace through one layer of air, then another, until at last they fell through the clouds — and the ground appeared.

Presently Abraytha remembered himself and unfurled his wings. Presently he felt a painful pull where they joined with his shoulder blades, as if a powerful gust of wind had rammed into them; he quickly realised that in this weaker gravity, what he'd meant as simply a gradual slowing factor had instead been enough to almost stop them dead. It was as if his wings were *over* sophisticated for this environment. Not often had the Unbound Scavenger — a man of few friends, though he did try — been told that he was *too good for this world,* but in this instance, he felt the phrase might fit.

Still, there was more to dwell on here than his own person.

"Xi, look!"

As he spoke, Abraytha nudged his companion and she opened her eyes slowly, to find that she was still in mid-air; that their pair of them were hanging in place, suspended amongst a sea of clouds. More than anything else, she recoiled — a little, instinctively — at the sight of the massive red sun in the distance. It was huge, but surprisingly dim, taking up ten times the amount of space in the sky she'd ever seen in all her travels with Abraytha; even the cold star that froze at the centre of her homeworld's system was no match for this swollen glowbug, this monstrous ember.

Dim, yes, but warm. The cold sun she'd known really was the only comparison, yet it was also its converse. This star was the other season; burning, not freezing — Summer, not Winter.

She always felt the conflict of nature between Universes like that, like the conflict of seasons alien and homely, though this Universe felt ever-so-slightly claustrophobic, on top of that. As though an eternal thaw would someday melt even the Great Black Winter between the stars.

Moving on from the star, the sky was a bright purple, fading towards blue near the edges and punctuated by dark black clouds akin to those that brought forth the great blizzards on Xiantio's homeworld. Further down, the land was coated in a thick layer of pink — bright pink that cut against the sky. The tops of trees, perhaps, or things quite like trees. In the distance, they gave way to bright green oceans. Probaby water, but they couldn't be certain.

It was rather pretty, all things considered, and it was nice to be alive. Still…

"Could we land… please?"

"Oh, right, of course!"

Abraytha re-orientated his wings, descending towards the ground with a grace that surprised even him. This lighter, yet still somehow dense, atmosphere gave him far more control than would be possible on his homeworld, or anywhere in or around the Bellbreaker's Cradle.

As they descended, Xiantio noticed something in the distance. Down near the foot of the mountains, there lay a rounded ship — its hull as shiny as ice, and as blue as the oceans on Evestaar. Some kind of conventional spaceship, then — not an eccentric Void Ship like *Katioka*.

Home or not, it looked relatively harmless; certainly, Xiantio didn't feel any creeping sense of uncertainty and dread emanating from it, which was more than could be said of the duo's previous destination.

"Over there," Xiantio pointed out, taking the request to land as close to it as possible to be implicit in their tone of voice. "I think it's a starship!"

Abraytha nodded, and let himself drop through the trees.

Though he made no verbal reply, Abraytha's enthusiasm about the discovery of the starship was considerably lesser than his companion's. Whatever it was, this metal craft was no *Katioka*, and its presence here merely reminded him of the loss of his home. Still, besides this object, the world seemed uninhabited. They might as well start here.

The universe was rational, in some ways, that much Abraytha could tell from his instincts alone. There must be someone governing it all, someone who could help; he only hoped they would be willing.

* * *

"Uh… bad news, Zhei. Engine's totalled."

Reth popped her head back out from the hatch in the wall, gesturing with her wings for emphasis.

Zhei sighed. *Great.* This far out from the frontier of Ales-Vos space, it'd cost a prohibitively expensive amount to procure the necessary parts. And to think they were just one jump away from it going perfectly, first try!

This time, at least, they'd got far enough that the university couldn't possibly scuttle the mission. The memory still stung — the way they'd been recalled, halfway to victory, over a smattering of technical errors. A long time ago now. They'd had a larger crew, then; this time it was just them and their new assistant. The university would only give the funding on that condition. Well, Zhei would take that pittance and bring them the stars.

The stars. Ales-Vos space travel had always been unreliable over long distances. There had been no cause to perfect it. In the central planetary systems, no stars were more than half a light year or so apart. Out here, however, as many as four light years or more separated them; oh yes, a lot could go wrong with that kind of a journey. But think of the wonders that might await in these unsounded depths of space! Here, beneath their feet, was the first of them.

Zhei glanced over at Reth. Their assistant seemed by no means to be thrilled by the knowledge that they stood, but for the hull of the starship, upon alien ground; as a matter of fact, Reth seemed a little panicked, no doubt by the thought of being stuck here. Ah, well. Zhei knew from experience that she'd get used to the excitement. Yes, Zhei *liked* Reth; she was enthusiastic, respectful, eager to learn. The perfect assistant, and more; Zhei thought her to be the very picture of their own younger self, of the person they'd been when they first left their university for an archaeological post. Their fondness for her was tinged with a kind of sweet nostalgia.

Which was not to say that they'd be unduly lenient with her, oh no — this was real science and it required discipline. Reth would learn that, as they had. Hence:

"Well? Why are you just standing there?" Their prodding was not unkind, but it was urgent. "Go on then — draft up the request! The sooner it gets

through, the sooner we get off this planet. We don't want to be stuck here any longer than we have to…"

The last sentence was not a question, but Zhei had pitched it like one.

Reth nodded apologetically. "Yes, of course, Professor. Sorry."

Zhei didn't reply, instead slowly unfurling their wings to emphasise their impatience. Reth took immediate note of this, moving over to their flight computer and getting to work.

Though almost as soon as that happened, Zhei's own flight computer, the primary one, began beeping.

"What's that?" Reth looked up suddenly, the feathers on her head standing up as she did.

Zhei raised a hand to calm her. "Just the proximity alarm — it's only to be expected that a planet like this would have *some* sort of native life. I'll handle it, keep working."

Reth nodded as Zhei left the cockpit, heading down the ship's boarding ramp into the clearing. They knew they need not fear a predator; they were the largest sapient species in their local Universal area, and by a wide margin at that. They must be. Evolving on a planet that revolved around a star almost fifty times larger than itself, the largest star in the known Universe, enabled their biosphere to get far more energy than any of the others around them. No predatory species ever discovered had been big enough to successfully hunt an Ales-Vos outside of those on their homeworld of Eyne.

Which is why Zhei was immediately shocked when two bipeds almost twice their height emerged from the surrounding trees.

* * *

"Hey — Abraytha — everything feels so *light*!"

Xiantio raised a comically large branch with one hand in demonstration as the two marched through the forest.

Abraytha, more attuned to this lifestyle, was quick to explain.

"Yes, the gravity is certainly different," he said. "That is, *gravity itself*. We're in a whole new universe, after all — the fundamental physical laws of a given anchored dimension rely on certain fixed values, after all, universal constants. Many worlds have them, defined by their Archons or equivalent — but not all civilisations and groups which filled that role chose the same basic principles."

He looked at Xiantio, with an encouraging, teacher-like smile which he hoped wouldn't seem patronising. Instead he found that his companion was staring at him in a mix of confusion and… was that amusement? He could swear she'd stifled a chortle. He stopped walking, ever so briefly, as he looked himself over, half-expecting to find a bird's-nest tangled in his horns or something of the sort. When that yielded nothing, he blinked, running back what he'd just said in his mind —

— and slapped his forehead.

"Oh, of *course*! You know that, don't you… *Your* world had Archons of *Winter*. Yes… Very different from the Third Universe's bunch, they were all about *Time*, of course."

"Yeah, you've mentioned them," said Xiantio.

Mentioned, yes, but not *explained,* Xiantio didn't add. Abraytha seemed to speak of the beings in awed terms, but not particularly favourable ones. And mark, this was the very same Abraytha who had so effortlessly breached the Cathedral of Winter, as if it was all in a day's work. Sometimes the gap between them frightened her; *he* never did, but there was such a gulf of experience between them. They came from such different… worlds.

"I'm sorry," Abraytha told her again. "I didn't think…"

"No, it's okay. Really. I shouldn't have giggled at you, this was interesting."

"Mh," Abraytha hummed uncertainty, clearly weighing whether he should suspect Xiantio of simply humouring him.

Then he straightened and sped up his walk, as if increasing the physical distance between himself and the scene of his blunder would help with the lingering embarrassment.

"Oh, well, I'm only guessing, in any case," he continued more loudly, staring straight ahead. "Low gravity might mean any *number* of things. But if I'm right… a-*ha*! Perhaps *they* can tell us more."

Xiantio, who'd been keeping her eyes fixed on Abraytha, had to make a conscious effort to look past him and follow the direction of his gesture. Even with Abraytha's cheerful declaration to serve as forewarning, it gave her a bit of a start — there, up ahead, stood a person. At any rate, she assumed it was a person, albeit bird-like rather than mammalian.

Which must mean…

"…*Huh*."

They'd made it to the ship. Quicker than Xiantio expected; she must have lost track of the distance amidst the trees. Compared to the oppressive industrial atmosphere of the Scrapyard or the sheer, crushing mundanity of the Cathedral — not the Winter one, the one with that vampiric vestige — this was a downright paradise and, in spite of their worries about being separated from *Katioka* and any other means of freely travelling from this Universe, they'd… admittedly been enjoying the walk.

Come to that, Abraytha himself, though clearly unnerved by their predicament, had always been quick to distract, and had now clearly become interested in the exact nature of this place.

Not that Xiantio didn't also have their own interest; when the panicked avian gestured towards the two of them in confusion, it was she who took the lead.

"Hello," she began — speaking softly, just in case this being couldn't understand her, and had to rely on her tone to judge if she was friend or foe. "Nice to… meet you?"

"Y… you can talk?" the avian asked, confused, and then stood there, evidently as clueless as she was as to how to proceed.

Not exactly the reaction they'd expected. Noticing Xiantio's prolonged silence, Abraytha took the lead.

"We're just passing through," he said, smiling brightly, and held out a hand. "That's your ship there, yes? My friend and I saw you were in a bit of trouble. Thought, perhaps, you'd like a hand?"

The avian seemed hesitant to take up the offered handshake; Abraytha froze, stumped himself. It was Xiantio's turn to take up the slack, being, she suspected, more aware than Abraytha of the effect a horned bat-creature looming over you might have on the average being of lesser stature.

"Hey, it's okay," she said. "Like he said, we're here to help. This is Abraytha."

"Abraytha Janus Colefia," he added with more showmanship; introductions, he could always do. "Known far, and wide, and wider, as the Unbound Scavenger. And this is my friend, Xiantio, the — uhm — Curious Explorer?"

Much to the traveller's relief, the well-meaning hesitation of that final sentence seemed to do the trick; the avian took Abraytha's hand after a moment, and composed themself.

"P-pleased to — er, I'm sorry for my rudeness," they said with what the travellers recognised as an apologetic smile, though no lips were involved. "We just… don't meet all that many new species this far out and, well — biologically, you're a bit of an oddity."

"Oh, dear, am I? Let me guess, the wings?" Abraytha guessed, in the tone of someone who'd had this conversation many times before. "Or is it the horns? No, hang on…"

"Ahm, no," the avian interrupted hesitantly, "I meant *both* of you."

Xiantio and Abraytha exchanged quick looks.

"Is it… the xertonoid body shape? But you're not that far off —"

"It's your height," the alien blurted out, and sighed, as if unsure whether to begin. "Our race lives around the largest star in the known Universe, and we're half your height! Which would have to mean — oh, forgive me, I'm rambling. Come in, come in!" they said, gesturing at the ship with a wing. "I

have so many questions, and — we really *could* do with a hand, if you're offering. And you're able.

"We'd *love* to help," Xiantio assured them once again.

"For a price, of course," Abraytha added. Xiantio glared at him and he held his hands up. "I just meant knowledge!"

"Oh, I'm only a humble cosmic archaeologist, I don't know how much I —"

Abraytha's eyes lit up.

* * *

"I'm Zhei, by the way."

The interior of the ship was practical, but homely, with little to evidence that Abraytha and Xiantio had found themselves in an entirely alien universe. The cosmic archaeologist's casual introductions only added to the peculiar sense of familiarity.

"Professor of Archaeological Research at the University of Eyne," the avian added, perhaps recalling the relish with which Abraytha had informed them of his own title. "And this is my assistant Reth," they finished, just as another avian poked their head out from a panel in the wall —

— then Reth squawked in panic as she saw the twin, gigantic figures of Abraytha and Xiantio stomping towards her, and darted back whence she had come.

"*Sorry*!" Xiantio squeaked reflexively.

"What… are those?" came a quivering voice from behind the panel.

"Just two of the locals, Reth," Zhei coaxed her, waving a wing. "Don't be skittish."

At that, a brief, silent debate broke out between Abraytha and Xiantio, at the conclusion of which the latter could not stop the former from speaking up.

"Ahem —" he coughed as Xiantio cringed. "As a matter of fact, we're not *exactly* what you'd call *locals*."

Zhei raised an eyebrow-feather.

"Aren't you now? Not from this planet? My-my. That certainly would explain the physiology —"

They'd already hopped to a computer and pulled up a star map when Abraytha spoke again. Xiantio made no attempt to stop him this time; in for a penny, in for a pound.

"Not from this *Universe*, actually," he said with studied false modesty.

Reth popped her head out from the panel again at that.

"*Extra-Universals*!? What — but — oh! Oh! But that explains so much…"

Her fear suddenly overcome by an interest, she approached. Reth was a little smaller than Zhei, with a more prominent crest and brighter feathers; both their wings seemed more fragile than Abraytha's, though given how much easier it was to fly here, that wasn't too surprising.

"What are your worlds like?" Reth had come as close to them as she dared, and pulled out a notebook; now there seemed to be no stopping them, all outward traces of their earlier hesitation melting away. "How did you come here? May I see your Void Ship? Why is the —"

Abraytha opened his mouth to begin explaining, but Xiantio interrupted. "Perhaps we should fix *your* ship first."

"You're welcome to have a look," said Zhei with a gesture at the hatch Reth had come out of.

Abraytha strode over and swung the door open. "Oh? Oh, now this is interesting."

"Seen anything like it before?"

Zhei's tone was falsely casual as they looked on, but they couldn't stop their eyes widening with hope. They were *so close* to completing the mission;

these providential aliens could be all they needed, never mind the breakthrough their very presence represented.

"Abraytha's been around," said Xiantio. "I'm sure he'll have *some* familiarity —"

"Not a clue," Abraytha interrupted.

Xiantio sighed.

"*However*," the traveller continued, "I think I just figured out why this Universe's background felt just that little bit softer when we first arrived — one of the forces is missing"

"Your Universe has *four* fundamental forces?" Reth asked, confused.

"Well, *my* universe is more of a side-pocket, but the macro-universe which it is near, the Bellbreaker's Cradle, has four, yes. Yours seems to be missing the weak nuclear force — that is, I believe, the one that helps with subatomic decay. Guess your versions of the Archons of Time never thought that one up. Or it was voted out, I don't know."

"Archons of Time?" Zhei repeated, and for a moment Abraytha feared that the portentous, mythical name had turned the scientist against them — but then the avian returned to the star map. "Now that *is* intriguing," they continued, "because our expedition is headed to planet Vesperos… And we are, as I said, archaeologists. We don't know what's there now, but according to legend, it is the homeworld of a powerful, spacefaring civilisation who have come down to us in the creation myths of other races. Beings who set Time in potion."

"Archons of Time?"

"*Dukes* of Time," the Professor corrected, "but that seems a small difference. There *are* those who claim that the Dukes, if they existed, genuinely enacted the physical laws of our world; oh, I never *believed*, but if what you say of this 'Cradle' is true… My, my."

Dukes of Time? Xiantio's eyes had lit up at the very mention of that almost comical name. She had little to contribute when it came to forces, electrons,

and indeed, spaceships. Her universe was governed solely by the laws of winter, far more conceptual than anything so scientific. But 'the Dukes of Time' was a *title*, a mark of authority, like unto the Archons of Winter of her native Evestaar; she well remembered the circumstances of her first encounter with Abraytha. If anyone had a way out of this dimension, it must be these Dukes.

Xiantio looked to Abraytha "Think you can fix it?"

"Shouldn't be too hard, I've worked more magic with less." Abraytha held out a hand. "Give me any tools you have."

Zhei pointed to Reth. "Get the tools."

"Yes, Professor."

"And you two, thanks for your help. It's awfully kind of you."

"If there's any hope of us getting back to where we're supposed to be, it'll lie with those Dukes, I bet," Xiantio blurted out.

"It's even possible," Abraytha added, "that my ship, *Katioka,* was drawn to their homeworld, assuming it followed us to this dimension at all."

Zhei nodded in acknowledgement; they were inclined to trust the strangers, somehow, but, as Abraytha and Xiantio had guessed, knowing that they had their own incentive to see the mission through was an added balm to their remaining anxieties.

Soon, Abraytha selected a small, strangely-shaped metal knife from a box Reth had held out for him to peruse — and then he got to work.

To him, the engine was a fascinatingly unique piece of machinery, with the fuel being a strange mixture of inexplicably stable particles that Abraytha knew decayed rapidly in most other universes. Diprotons, delta-2^+ baryons, even a few muons and pions. *Impossible matter*. The actual running of the engine escaped him, but the damage was primarily mechanical, so it was an easy enough job. Zhei had insisted they lacked the parts to fix it, but if living in *Katioka* was any indication, Abraytha had got very good at repurposing components to fit a purpose they weren't intended for.

Meanwhile, Xiantio tasked themself with finding out what they could about the Dukes, to see if they'd be receptive to cries for help. Defaulting to the closest available authority on the subject, she asked Professor Zhei.

What she learned was this: few records around the universe mentioned these 'Dukes', and of these scattered sources, even fewer provided significant context. But cross-referencing them, and redacting the more obviously theological adornments, yielded a reasonably coherent picture: one way or the other, the Dukes had begun to reign over Reality, mastering Time itself, until *something* — perhaps a viral infection at the sub-universal level, though many of the myths furnished their apocalypse with one satanic figure or another — had caused them to become extinct. Not to die — the myths were very consistent on this — but to simply *disappear*, almost as if they had never even existed.

Almost was, of course, the operative word. As the existence of these very records indicated, there were artefacts strewn across the cosmos which were suspected by those more superstitious of scientists to have fallen from this 'Original Civilisation', these 'Angels of the Before'. There was that, and there were the legends of the cultures they'd touched at some formative point.

In all of this, only one proper name had survived; all else was nicknames and titles. It was the name of the Dukes' homeworld, their safe haven, their *heaven* according to some: Vesperos. Zhei talked of this point at considerable length: after a while, Xiantio understood that the specificity of the name, found in the tales of several cultures, had been a key piece of evidence in the quest to prove that the similar legends pointed at genuine cosmic history, and not evidence of psychosexual archetypes universal to sapient life, or whatever else.

Of course, both Zhei and Reth were every bit as interested in the realities Xiantio and Abraytha had come from as Xiantio was in the history of their own. Xiantio was reluctant to share everything about their heritage so readily, given this was still an unfamiliar world.

No, it wasn't just that. Something about what they'd been told of this dimension *unsettled* Xiantio, in a deep and special way. It was not its past which had frightened them, but its future. Different laws of physics or not,

this reality was destined to come to an end someday. That, in itself, was hardly remarkable. But according to the projections, *this* world was to meet its fate by collapsing back into the singularity out of which the Dukes had blown it like hot glass — it would rush in on itself, compress itself into a single point of infinite density and infinite heat. A final all-encompassing Summer. That concept was so fundamentally opposed to her wintry essence that she could feel the very conflict of nature between herself and the structure of this alien chronology in which she found herself stranded. With the catastrophe distant by aeons, it was hardly overpowering, but it ran so deep that Xiantio couldn't be sure it wasn't the cause of her reluctance to share and her impatience to leave.

It didn't help her sense of existential dissonance that Reth and Zhei had delivered this fact with little fanfare; for most, she supposed, it would probably be little more than a bit of trivia to occasionally muse upon, if one felt introspective. The fact that the universe would one day end was a shared feature of many realities; it was certainly a common trait of anchored worlds, according to Abraytha. To suspend a world indefinitely required far more precision than just making it live 'long enough', and the gods had little cause to bother, since they could simply wind it all back when the time came.

Xiantio, then, remained reserved — but *Abraytha*, was all too happy to share, and the avian scientists were subjected to a twelve minute long long infodump about his history, all whilst fiddling around with the engine and talking about that as well.

"Finished!" Abraytha declared, indicating that he'd finished repairing the engine. The avians breathed a sigh of relief and Abraytha took the point. "Should be working now."

Over at the control panel for the spacecraft, Zhei brought up the engine parameters "Engine's stable — whatever you've done, you've fixed it. Thank you, Abraytha."

"Not a problem," Abraytha nodded "Oh… by the way, could we ask for a lift?"

"It's the least we could do."

Xiantio took Abraytha by the shoulder and pulled him aside. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"*Relax*, Xi. They seem nice! And besides, we can't just stay on this planet forever, can we?"

He had a point. This planet seemed otherwise devoid of sapient life, whilst this 'Vesperos' was probably their best bet in this entire reality of finding a way beyond the confines of this world. But still…

"It's not that I don't trust them, Abraytha. It's just… something feels off. I'm not sure what it is, it just doesn't feel right."

Abraytha didn't understand where she was coming from, but he still acutely remembered what had happened back at the scrapyard. Abraytha had walked directly into danger without so much as a second thought, whilst Xiantio had somehow known something was wrong.

He'd not listened to her then, and they'd almost lost each other because of it.

That would not happen again. Abraytha put his hand on her shoulder. "I trust you, Xi."

This shocked Xiantio, and she blushed a little. In truth, her feelings around Abraytha were still all heightened from the events at the Cathedral and on the ship with the Dead Weathermen. The two had clung to each other as they fell through the Void itself… To be reassured that the trust that that represented was real, was *genuine,* felt good.

"We have no choice, really," Xiantio said at last, in a sobering tone. "They're our only way out of here."

Abraytha nodded slightly, then clapped his hands, turning to the two avians.

"Alright, just a quick lift to this planet you're looking for, then we'll be out of your feathers."

"If you ever change your mind," Zhei said, "you would always be welcome back on Eyne."

"If we ever find ourselves in this reality again, maybe we'll stop by."

Reth held up her wing "You… may want to sit down for this bit."

The Unbound Scavenger and his Winterian companion complied, though the chairs built for the spacecraft weren't exactly the most comfortable, obviously being intended for the much smaller avians.

Zhei pressed a button. "Brace for take-off!"

Reth took a seat next to Xiantio, closing her eyes as she lay flat against the chair.

The spacecraft slowly lifted up from where it had embedded itself, twisting vertical as all the doors to the outside world snapped shut. Xiantio noted the craft didn't even have artificial gravity like *Katioka*, but that wasn't exactly surprising considering the low gravity of this world.

Zhei remained fastened to the console, even as they now hung from the wall due to the rotation of the ship. Performing a final set of adjustments upon the monitor, they aimed the spaceship towards the outskirts of a nebula, then zeroed-in on a small red star around which lay a blue-green planet. Targeting near the orbit of the planet, they locked in the coordinates before releasing themself from the console. They spread their wings and glided down to the chairs, where they strapped themself down next to Abraytha.

"I'd recommend staying as straight as possible; for a first time user, this can be a little… intense."

"Oh, we've been through *way* worse — right, Xi?"

Xiantio didn't respond; she was focused on staying straight, as the avians had advised. Zhei pressed a button on the left wall next to their chair. The front of the spacecraft suddenly and rather rapidly contracted, feeling almost like they were about to be crushed flat. Then there was a loud cracking *BOOM* from the engines, and the spaceship sprung back to normal.

Zhei unclipped their straps and floated over towards the console, the gravity gone. Pulling up the spaceship's viewscreen revealed why — the

destination Zhei had plugged in now hung in front of them. A blue-green world, surface scarred by slashes of incongruent terrain; whole areas seemed to have been flattened according to some simple mathematical formula, and craters were scattered across the surface, including in the ocean — which somehow refused to flow into them and drain away.

Zhei was staring at the screen, eyes wide "I'd always heard the stories but… to see it in person."

"That's temporal scarring alright, whatever happened here…" Abraytha came up beside them, his wings still providing an incredible level of control in the atmosphere of the spacecraft.

The damage was familiar. It was like the boundary of the Gieakraal — his people's own mini-universe — only far less precise. There were deep gashes in the Universe where bits of reality had been splintered up from the planet's past or future and slammed back into its present as projectiles, using history as a weapon. The hallmarks of a great temporal cataclysm.

"You've never known what caused those Dukes of yours to disappear, have you?"

"No. It's been a thrilling, inebriating, damnable mystery for as long as we can remember. Some say it was a civil war — I know a chap who insists that it was intercosmic bats. People will believe anything…" The Professor laughed hollowly. "You know, I liked to think they'd simply retired, and erased themselves from the records. Perhaps from History itself, if you believed in time travel, but I thought it had all been peaceful — thought they might be out there, somewhere, even now. I must sound like the most dreadful, most naive old fool…"

"Don't say that," said Reth, saddened in turn.

"There's nothing wrong with hoping," said Abraytha, more decisive. "Hope is what brought us all here. And you might have a case yet! Who says they're *all* dead? I, for one, *certainly* hope not. They're our ticket out of this dimension, dash it all! I say let's go down there and have a look for ourselves!"

That speech, declaimed so loudly, by the end, that Abraytha was shouting outright in his intrepid enthusiasm, snapped Zhei out of her stupor. Yes. Yes! The stranger was right, hang it all! They were here to do a job; serious research, investigative science of the highest kind. Just looking upon the world from on high, coming to some premature conclusions, and feeling sorry for oneself, was *not* the order of the day.

They brought up a scan of the surface, though the data was corrupted around the temporal anomalies and those areas showed up as a garbled mess. Nonetheless, the scan made the choice of destination pretty obvious. A structure in the northern hemisphere of the planet, on an archipelago at the edge of the largest landmass to the west and largest ocean to the east. It stood at the height of a mountain and was shaped roughly like a pyramid. A very, very large one.

Zhei turned back to Reth, who was still sitting in her chair hyperventilating. Which was unsurprising, really; she'd never handled those jumps very well. Zhei still remembered how badly sick they'd been after their first one.

"Reth, you alright there?"

"I'll b-be fine in a m-moment, Professor." Reth reached for her restraints and released them, floating free from her chair

Abraytha turned back. "Xi?"

Xiantio's eyes were still wide and they were shaking, just a little. Abraytha repeated himself and Xiantio responded with a whisper. "Are we dead…?"

"We're fine, we're fine don't worry," Abraytha floated over and released Xiantio, who reflexively hugged him, to his mild surprise.

"We fell so far…" she said in the same hollow whisper. "I thought we were going to fall forever…"

"Oh Xi…" Abraytha returned the embrace "I'm sorry, for all of it… We lost the Ship because of me, we fell through the Void to this world because of me, because my mind wasn't strong enough, because I lost control. I'm sorry."

"No…" Xiantio's voice was still soft; the roughness of this form of faster-than-light travel had clearly done a number on them. Nonetheless, they now spoke with clarity. "We were both of us bewitched by that… *thing*. You saved me, so I saved you."

She released Abraytha and shook her head, perceptions clearing at last "You felt it, right?"

"Four years in four seconds, yeah I felt it. Been a long time since I've travelled by such a primitive method of faster-than-light travel, it's normally way too inefficient for large distances…"

"Shouldn't be a problem here — this reality is small and short-lived. It contracts as we speak, inwards towards final oblivion." Xiantio gestured towards Zhei, who was still guiding the ship. "They told me a little, whatever rules this Universe runs by making it tightly packed, light, young and small. My world was large and cold and empty, filled with Winter…"

"The Bellbreaker's Cradle is similar, but not *quite* so cold everywhere. Though it was headed for a freeze, at least according to my father's book."

"I wonder if it was on purpose; perhaps the Dukes of Time are also Archons of *Summer*."

Abraytha rubbed his chin. "It's a possibility, but this feels like an accident to me."

"How do you accidentally mess up defining a Universe?"

Abraytha shrugged. "There is an uncountably infinite number of universes out there, someone must've figured out how to do it."

The two were interrupted as Reth squawked in surprise. They turned to see her looking through the viewscreen as the structure from the scanner approached.

The monument towered above the ruined city below it — they saw, now, that its outline on the scanner had been misleading. It was *like* a large pyramid, certainly, but its sides were curved rather than flat, with beams running up at regular intervals. Whatever its exact shape, it pierced the clouds

and rose above even the biggest nearby mountain, which loomed in the distance, cracked in twain like a tree-stump struck by lightning.

The superstructure of the building was mangled in a few places, battle scars of a long finished conflict, yet it still stood in spite of the damage.

"The Temple of Temporality…" Zhei said. "I didn't think it really… I mean the records were so…"

Reth's own comment was shorter, more decisive, and perhaps of a more mundane nature, she sounded but no less awed. "It's so big."

"And *heavy!* Look at that," Zhei gestured to the scanner, "it's made entirely of protons, neutrons and electrons, not a single delta baryon, nor heavy lepton… this was a structure built under an entirely different set of physical laws to the ones the rest of the Universe operates under."

"Wait, what's that…" Reth pointed to a small spike in the scanning signal.

"*That*," Zhei pulled up the results to the full screen, "is a photon burst… Hold on. Hold on!" they said, growing more frenzied by the word. "Hold on, that's a *signal!* Reth, it's a radio signal — there's something down there, still able to transmit…"

"A survivor?" asked Reth.

At this, Zhei stilled, suddenly uncertain. "No… No, that's not possible. There were no survivors." Zhei crossed their arms. "How *could* there be? The planet is a temporal wreck. It's as the records said — the Dukes were eradicated from history, wiped out of all time…"

"*I'm* still here," Abraytha interjected, one challenging eyebrow raised, "and *my* homeworld was excised from the history of its Universe…"

Zhei hesitated — then reached for the controls again. "…Alright," they said; if they'd had a lower lip, Xiantio thought they'd have been biting it by now. "There, I've sent a *quick* response — j-just to prove that…"

They paused.

The sinewave of the signal had changed its shape radically. The language was still unintelligible, but it had clearly shifted in immediate response to the Professor's broadcast.

"By Eyne's grace…" they breathed out. "Reth's right, that's not a computer, there's a survivor." Zhei zeroed in on the signal, frantic now. "The top of the Temple, right below the spire. I'm detecting *vital signs* — someone's *alive* down there!"

"What?" said an elated Reth. "We have to g —"

"I'm already steering us down!" Zhei crowed. "*Yippee*!"

"H-hang on. Are we sure this is a good idea?" Xiantio asked. "What if they're hostile?"

Abraytha waved a placating hand. "C'mon Xi, we're not here to fight. I'm sure if we're just honest with them they'll be fine."

"And if they're not?"

"We do have firearms onboard," Zhei informed them, their tone going formal, though they were still smiling giddily. "Just in case. I'll bring a gun, so will Reth."

Zhei reached under the console and pulled out what looked to Abraytha like a rather primitive energy weapon — they handed it to Reth, then found another one for themself.

"See?" they said, pointing it up an inch, though not so much as to put Abraytha at risk. "We'll be fine."

"If you say so," Xiantio replied, still feeling on-edge.

But then, the nature of this whole reality was anathema to her core being, so she suppressed the feeling. The chill down her spine was nothing to do with the signal, probably. Abraytha knew what he was doing — right?

* * *

A docking bay lay open at the top of the Temple, and the Ales-Vos spacecraft fit comfortably through the entrance. As Zhei spun down the

engine, allowing it to settle to a halt, they released the doors and stepped free from the console.

They walked down the ramp and over to the edge of the docking bay. It was an almost completely straight drop four kilometres down to the base of the structure, where an artificial forest sat; the outer superstructure curved away to allow for more room, and corridors crisscrossed the lower levels connecting the central column to the outer beams.

Abraytha spread his wings, but Xiantio put a hand on his shoulder. "Maybe we shouldn't just yet."

"Alright… fine." Abraytha was clearly a little disappointed by that, but he quickly shook it off, turning back towards the door at the far end of the docking bay. "Through there, right Zhei?"

"That's where the signal is coming from, yes."

Reth gripped her weapon uncomfortably, and Zhei put a hand on her shoulder. "It's alright Reth, you probably won't have to use it, it's just a precaution."

Reth holstered the gun on her belt, relaxing a little, though Zhei could tell she was still nervous. They'd been pretty nervous the first time an expedition hadn't gone to plan too, though this was a bit more intense than that, this was *the* Temple of Temporality on *the* Vesperos, and *there was someone still living in it*.

Zhei themself wasn't too worried; by all accounts the Dukes of Time were a wise and noble bunch — perhaps officious, but certainly not prone to random acts of senseless violence against harmless strangers. There'd be no reason for them to be hostile; in fact, given the existence of the broadcast, the odds were they'd *welcome* the help.

* * *

The corridors of the Temple were surprisingly mundane — flat and angular. The architecture almost looked Terran. Though, Abraytha mused, if it was human, it took inspiration from one of their far more boring architectural movements, all minimalist and futurist with big windows and white walls. At least the Archons of Time, according to *The Bellbreaker's Cradle*

and Related Worlds Thereof, had shades of brass and curved surfaces in their architecture, and things had to be dire if he was considering *their* style preferable.

Although the primary corridor had a lot of offshoots and side pathways, Zhei doggedly followed the signal in a straight line, with the others in tow — until finally, a large door opened up to reveal a big square room. Abraytha was gratified to find that this one was actually furnished and decorated in the kind of lavish, faintly tacky style he'd expected of people who called themselves Dukes.

In the centre of the room was a golden table with intricately-carved legs; and at that table, there sat a tall, dark-haired man. It would have been easy to mistake him for another piece of interior decoration: his green robes, with their large sleeves and stripes of red and white along the edges, were adorned with elaborate, embroidered patterns that recalled nothing so much as the shimmering wallpaper, and his head supported a ceremonial headdress that curved outwards and downwards, with a golden seal impressing itself upon the wearer's forehead. His benign smile was absolutely immobile until he spoke.

In front of him, food had been laid out for exactly four guests.

"Welcome, welcome. You must have so many questions."

Even Zhei was rendered speechless at that; not only could the stranger be understood, but he'd known they were coming.

Abraytha stepped forwards. "I must say this is the most hospitable welcome I've had so far when breaking into a reality-controlling ecclesiastical building. Which I've probably done too many times…."

"Oh I can assure you, there are no other 'ecclesiastical buildings' quite like this." He made a regal gesture. "Come, sit."

Abraytha walked forwards, and Xiantio, Reth and Zhei followed behind.

It was odd, Zhei mused; the man possessed a similar physiology to their two guests, one could even assume they were kindred. No feathers, no beak; the same curious bare flesh, with flexible lips and a protuberance in the

middle of the face. The same hands and fingers. But a genetic relation would have been preposterous even if Abraytha and Xiantio had *not* been from another reality altogether.

The man waited patiently for the four to sit down at the table. Abraytha was the least hesitant; Xiantio, meanwhile, with feline suspicion, made sure to check the area out for traps before she committed.

Abraytha did not wait on any propriety before he picked up a small bowl, hoping its rich-looking contents were a soup of some sort, and not a sauce or gravy. That *would* have been embarrassing, especially after he swallowed half of it in one gulp. He hadn't realised until now how hungry he'd been.

"So," he said as he set it back down like a drunkard slamming a pint on a tavern-counter. "How'd you know we were coming?"

"Defence systems picked up your biodata the moment you entered the system," the man said, taking no visible offence at Abraytha's brusque manner. "Scarred though Vesperos may be, her defences remain. You would not have been able to so much as get down to the surface, had I not disabled the temporal barriers; and you could not have entered this building without disabling the security protocols."

"I *am* sorry we came to your home like thieves in the night," Professor Zhei said, attempting to match the man's genteel formality. "The Dukes of Time had been wiped out, a-as far as we knew, and the surface was so badly damaged that we just assumed…"

The man smiled wanly. "Your assumption was *nearly* correct, my friend… We were *'all but'* wiped out. I happen to be the exception. The Last of the Dukes of Time, if you like… You may call me Nous."

"Oh by Eyne's grace," Reth squirmed in her chair, vaguely tempted to hop off the golden chair and fall to her knees.

A Duke of Time. A real Duke of Time. Even expecting a survivor, she had anticipated some hardy, folksy band of scavengers; not this lordly figure who seemed to have stepped out of a stained glass window from one of the cultures which worshipped the ancient lords.

Nous laughed, his voice light and crystalline. "Worship will not be not necessary, my child," he assured her.

"R- Reth, I'm Reth," she stammered, before realising that he surely knew that, too.

Zhei put a wing over Reth's shoulder, saving her from melting from embarrassment. "Do forgive her, ahm, your grace," they said. "First expedition, you know. I am Professor Zhei, and these two are —"

"Abraytha Janus Colefia, the Unbound Scavenger," cut in the aforementioned, who was not about to have anyone — even a friend of circumstances — deprive him of his quintessential pleasure in life: dramatically introducing himself. He'd got to do it twice now, which to some childish part of him was enough to call this a very good day, vampires or no vampires. "And this is Xiantio."

Nous leant forwards "Is that so? There's something about you two."

"Oh, I should think so," Abraytha chuckled. "You see, we're…"

"Travellers," Xiantio interjected. "Left our homes behind to journey through the stars and all; we're from a very long way away."

"Evidently. My, my. Records will have to be adjusted… I didn't suspect that any Vesperonoids still existed in the Universe besides myself, after what happened during the Binding of Reality." Nous shook his head. "Do forgive me, my friends, I must sound dreadfully obtuse."

"We'd *like* to understand," Zhei dared to reply. "I'm a cosmic archaeologist you see, and — well — your impact, your people's impact I mean, on the structure and history of the Universe is… unparalleled. Immeasurable. If you could tell me anything, anything at all, that would be of *great* interest."

"Not a problem, Professor, not a bit of it!" Duke Nous replied, with the same indulgent laugh. "In truth I'd be grateful to pass on something of my culture. We were once a proud people, who reached for an impossible dream…" His eyes darkened. "…and paid the price. Our planet was ravaged in a great cataclysm — our power source had failed, you see — and our

dream was consumed in fire and shards of broken time, along with our home."

"But some of you survived?" Zhei had got out a notebook and was writing notes. Reth was picking at the food in front of her, but they could tell that she, too, was listening with rapt attention.

"*I* survived," Nous. "I was there, Professor, you must understand. Myself. I was… lucky, perhaps uniquely so. I was at the epicentre of the event, where our power source had been brought before it failed. I fell free as the Universe burst into flame around me. I saw Eternity, stretching out from this dreadful moment like a plume of black smoke — and then I woke up here, in the ruin of the Temple. Alone."

Xiantio shuddered at the thought; after all, it hadn't been all that long since they had landed here after falling themselves. Abraytha seemed unaffected — as ever, he was so *strong*… She wondered how he had become so used to these things.

Her heart was beating out of control, flashes of darkness and nothingness assailing her once again. She clutched her head and pushed herself up; at once, Abraytha got up from his own seat and put a hand on her shoulder.

"You alright, Xi?"

"I… I just need some air, I'll be alright."

"If anything's wrong…" he began.

Xiantio shook her head. "It's fine, Abraytha. Trust me."

"Alright."

Xiantio turned to leave, but Nous's soft voice behind her.

"Don't wander too far," he warned. "This place was ravaged by temporal fallout. Believe me, you wouldn't want to walk into an active time field; they can play havoc with the biology of lesser species."

She didn't really care to respond to that; she didn't really care for Nous at all. And clearly Nous didn't recognise her wintriness as worth his respect either, though that in and of itself was hardly an issue.

Although, she thought as she pushed past the door, perhaps it would do to look around a bit; it'd take her mind off of the fall at the very least.

Abraytha watched Xiantio leave, before reluctantly turning back to Nous. "She'll be alright out there, right?"

"You care about her, do you?"

Abraytha nodded.

"She'll be fine," Nous said wanly, "as long as she's sensible."

"She's more sensible than I am…" Abraytha sighed with a weary chuckle, looking down at what was left of the meal.

It had all been pretty good, all things considered, but it made him miss *Katioka*. His home, both their homes now, lost out there somewhere in the Void Between Worlds…

Abraytha wasn't one to dwell on these things; he always focused on the here and now, never potential future problems. It'd been one of the things he'd failed to account for in the Scrapyard and he had no doubt being separated from the ship again caused Xiantio a good deal of worry now too.

"How'd you do all this?" Zhei broke through the silence after a moment.

"How did I do what?" Nous asked. "You'll have to be a little more specific there."

Zhei gestured around themself. "All of *this*, become the Dukes of Time, build everything on this planet. And all that damage on your world's surface…"

"*That* was an accident," Nous cut them off sharply. "Some even cried sabotage, in those final moments; I suppose it hardly matters, now. But as for the binding of the laws of reality, when we became what we are now…. I can show you the device that was used to perform it. I *have* been thinking about

searching for a successor," he added mysteriously. "I think… yes, I think I would *very much* like to see you analyse it, Professor Zhei."

"Oh… oh my," Zhei stammered, and then was left speechless for a moment, reeling. "I… Reth, go back to the Ship and get all the equipment, will you?"

"Yes, o-of course, Professor," Reth stuttered.

She knew how composed Zhei normally was. If even *they* were overwhelmed, then this was big. She leapt clear from her chair and tried to take off for the door, but the air in here was thinner than she was used to and she failed to gain any height, falling over instead. She picked herself up, embarrassed, and ran for the door.

Zhei smiled a little. Reth was a good kid. They were sure she'd be a great archaeologist someday.

"Abraytha?" Nous waved a hand towards him. "The relativity engine's real-time interface is heavy, perhaps you could assist me in moving it into this room."

"Of course." Abraytha jumped up. "If you really need my help, but can I ask a favour?"

Nous laughed. "Not a problem, dear boy. Do walk with me," he added and stood up from the chair; Abraytha did the same and matched his stride.

"Wait! W-wait! What should I do?" Zhei called out, struggling to run after them with their shorter legs.

"Just wait here, we shall be back in due time" Nous said, leading Abraytha through the opposite door.

Xiantio stood, looking out over the surface of the planet. The air up here was very thin, but easily breathable for one like themself.

In truth it wasn't a bad planet, once you got past the scarring. The lone mountain in the distance had probably looked like a wonder from the ground, before this megastructure rose to eclipse it.

Her musings had moved on, wandering away from the fall and back to the nature of this reality. It felt *wrong*, that much she had detected from the offset, but it didn't only feel wrong because of her Wintriness; it felt broken in and of itself. Abraytha must be right — it *had* to have been an accident. But… there was something Nous had said. He'd claimed that the explosion of their power source had their planet, that a single "great cataclysm" had wiped out his kind. But the scarring across the planet's surface was inconsistent and incomplete, far from what she'd have expected of a planet-wide shockwave from a single temporal explosion. And as far as she could tell, it couldn't have caused total extinction; the Dukes should have been able to try again.

Something wasn't adding up.

Reth burst through the doors, running into the hanger, and Xiantio came over. "What happened?"

"Zhei told me to get all the equipment. That Duke, Nous, he's gonna show us how his kind — how his people *made* reality."

Xiantio nodded along without true enthusiasm — and was suddenly stuck with an idea. "Hey Reth, think you could access the city networks from here?"

"Uh… maybe, if the security's not good, but why?"

"I just have a hunch."

Reth and Xiantio went up the ramp to the console, and Reth pressed a few buttons and an unfamiliar data structure came up.

"Huh," she quickly remarked. "There… seems to be no security. Guess Nous wouldn't need any, if he lives here alone."

She left the console and headed into the hatch as Xiantio looked it over.

It was unfamiliar, but there was a certain pattern to it. After a moment, she carefully entered a query, and it pulled up a file. It was partially corrupted, but still somewhat legible.

Record of Vesperos, Volume 5

1545
… fell from the sky, on the island of Ho…

1560
… discovery… gift… eternal life…

1599
… victory… conquered Ts… ia… whole world united

1743
… Founder discovered the power to harness… rewrite reality…

Xiantio skipped forwards; the later sections seemed more legible.

1996
The X… 00 has been completed in T… n, and will henceforth be known as the Temple of Temporality. Staging location for the experiments to at long last conquer the very structure of the cosmos to align with our vision. A new model has been put forth, engineered to ensure the lesser species never have the time nor technology to oppose us, it is rapidly gaining popularity despite fringe concerns of unforeseen side effects of the removal of the Weak Nuclear Force from previous iterations of the plan.

2028
The Founder, Nous, has put forth the final proposal for the Binding of Reality. After approval from the Council of Dukes Most High, the Coulomb Collapse Initiator project will be finally put into effect, the core of the sun will be instantaneously transmuted into Diprotons and burnt off in a flash of energy so great, reality will be reshaped into our vision.

Year 0 Post-Binding
Something was wrong with the formula. The moment the device was activated and reality reshaped, our sun ceased to exist. The laws which were chosen to reshape reality forbade its very existence and persistence, and so it never was, it unravelled. Our planet has stabilised around a new star in the outskirts of the Sagittarius

Nebula, but from the un-space left behind pours forth a new enemy, we have no word for them in our culture other than V… s. Nous believes they are no threat to our primacy, for even without Nous's Star our temporal technology is far greater than anything they can muster. Already he arranges for the bifurcation of our homeworld, already we begin to march to war.

"War? But that's not what Nous said at all!"

Year 404 P.B.

Nous has deployed the temporal weaponry against our own people in the hope of stalling the Sh… but it is of no use. Even as the surface of Vesperos is ravaged and its first child-world is consumed by the neverwere, Nous refuses to give in, or to even offer terms. He has barricaded himself at the top of the Temple in a time bubble with our greatest, most terrible weapon. If he is successful, our people will be destroyed as surely as the vampires that assail us, and all will have been for nothing. I'm leaving this record in the hope something of our people may survive beyond the final day, something besides him.

Xiantio heard something fall to the ground behind her. She turned to see Reth — her small, bird-like form literally shaking.

"He was… lying to us," she forced out. "He — Xiantio! He's the one who — oh blessings… he… did all that. And Zhei's still in there *with him*…"

Xiantio turned back to the report; it was a concern of course but there was something else screaming at her in her mind, something she was overlooking.

"Vampires? Hold on, but wasn't that what Abraytha said his mother… *was*… one of those?"

Xiantio's eyes went wide, and she grabbed Reth's hand, already running.

"Wh —"

"Come on! We have to save him!"

* * *

"I really must thank you for coming here, to this world," Nous said.

They'd moved on from the over-decorated room, now, the taller, more graceful Duke leading Abraytha down a corridor and deeper into the heart of the Temple, almost like a child led by a hand to an initiation rite.

"Oh, pure happenstance, really," Abraytha demurred with a smile —

— but Nous spoke again, staring straight ahead.

"No, truly, I must," said the Duke, his light, playful tone now seeming almost threatening. "It was very… convenient." Suddenly he stopped, and turned to face Abraytha, with the same elegant smile. "So tell me… Do they know?"

"Mh? Does who know what?" Abraytha asked, confused.

Nous simply smiled and opened a door — Abraytha tried to pull his hand out of the Duke's grip, but couldn't stop himself from being led inside it without resorting to outright violence, which he still couldn't bring himself to do despite his growing unease. With a snap of his other hand's fingers, Duke Nous caused the door to snap shut. Only then did he speak.

"Your precious Xiantio." His voice had turned completely now; the warmth from their prior conversation was gone, replaced with something soft as silk but bitter as almonds. "Does she know what you are?"

"I — I don't under…"

"Don't play dumb with *me,* Abraytha. I know what you are… Last of your kindred, as I am mine."

Nous had withdrawn a control sceptre of some kind of metal box or barrel that stood at the centre of the room, surrounded by a tangle of gears, pulleys, capacitors, and other machinery.

"Listen," said Abraytha, "I think you have me all mixed up, Nous, I'm not, well… I'm not from this Universe. I tried to tell you before —"

— and Nous jabbed the artefact in his chest. "I know *that*, Star Vampire. We were to be more than mere *dukes,* before your cursed, alien kind poured

forth." He was hissing with contained rage, now, like a cobra preparing to strike. "We were to be *Emperors*!".

For Abraytha, it all clicked at once: there was no single great Cataclysm. The Dukes of Time really *were* like the Archons of Time, more alike than he'd guessed; and they'd fought a primordial war against the denizens of the Second Universe — or something very like it; that hardly mattered. What mattered was that the Dukes had *lost*.

And now he was taking the blame in the mind of the one survivor.

"Alright, a-alright," he said, holding his hands up. "I admit, I *am* of Star Vampire descent. Partly. B-but I assure you, I only just got to this Universe; I had no part in your War, and I have no quarrel with you. I'm only an Unbound —"

"Scavenger, oh yes," Nous recalled. "A *parasite*. A creature of lies and hunger. It's in your blood; more than your blood, it's in your essence, your very life-pattern. I swore an oath, tainted thing, an oath that I would wipe your kind from the face of reality — *my* reality," he emphasised, in a tone which suggested he meant more by that phrase than mere provenance. "Whatever the cost. I decimated my own homeworld, destroyed all our safehouses and boltholes — eradicated my own people to stamp out your *plague*. Mark me, abomination, I will see it done. Nothing can stop it now. *Have at thee!*"

And with a roar, Nous swung the sceptre, striking Abraytha across the head and knocking him down before he got the chance to respond. Abraytha wasn't truly knocked out — though a human might have been — but the shock was dizzying and the pain overwhelming; he couldn't seem to get up, flapping his wings uselessly against the floor as the man in green robes stalked up to him, looming over him. His features had regained that careless, quintessentially aristocratic good humour, his lips pursed in a thin-lipped smile, his eyes half-lidded.

"And there is something else, creature," he added in his unctuous, poisonous voice. "Like all your kind, you possess a gift, a gift of such value… Wasted on a thing like you, and something that I can use."

"…what?…"

* * *

Zhei turned towards the door in shock as it burst open, almost flying off its hinges.

Reth ran straight up to Zhei, breathless "By the grace of Eyne, you're alright…"

"Where's Abraytha?" Xiantio's voice was urgent.

Zhei threw up their wings "Your friend went off with Nous… I don't understand, what's going on?"

"We were lied to, Zhei. There was a war… Nous bombed his own people, he… wiped them all out… he…"

Xiantio interrupted — "He thinks Abraytha is the last of his people's enemy. *Where are they*?"

Zhei gestured to the door Abraytha and Nous had left through, and Xiantio immediately ran to it. Reth grabbed Zhei's hand. "We should help."

"W… what? I… what do we have to do with this?"

"It was Xiantio's idea to access the city networks, if we hadn't… we'd not have known what he did. If he lied about all that… what could he have done to us?"

Zhei nodded; there was truth to what Reth said, and when it came down to it, they trusted her, absolutely. That's why they'd chosen her as their assistant over all the others.

The two Ales-Vos rose and followed to the door, where Xiantio had forced it open with her claws.

* * *

When Abraytha came to, he found himself bound to a stake above what looked like some kind of clockwork reactor. It glowed, and as he looked up from it, around him swirled a maelstrom of possibility — it reminded him of

the damage that the surface of the world had sustained. A powerful device to be sure, but this was not the device they'd used for the binding; this was the weapon used to end their war.

Nous stood some distance away, holding what appeared to be a wooden sceptre.

"Sufficient to deal with one of your kind, I'm sure."

Abraytha tried to free his shoulders, but to no avail. "What is this, what are you doing?"

"Opening a rift. Using your biodata as a focus and your regenerative potential as a power source. I will burn this world, use its power to drive this weapon through to your reality and then bind its physical laws… but not to Light and Blessed Logic, oh no. To Oblivion itself! I will not only destroy *you*, I will wipe out your tainted kindred once and for all."

"You idiot!" Abraytha shouted back. "I wasn't *born* in the Second Universe, I've never even been there! All you'll manage is to destroy the Gieakraal, and there are no other vampires there!"

Nous waved his hand dismissively. "You'd say anything to save your cursed race."

"No, I *wouldn't*, but I *would* do anything to save my home. My *real* home," he emphasised. "And also to save Xi! For pity's sake, *listen* to me! How can you not — how could you…"

Abraytha trailed off, his throat starting to hurt and his head still spinning from the blow. He fell silent — and thought. If he hadn't already been staked, that meant the weapon wasn't powered up yet. Which meant Nous needed him alive until then.

Aha. Leverage.

"Hey. Nous," he asked, much more quietly, matching creepy-casual for creepy-casual.

The Duke pinched the bridge of his nose, as if he were being bothered by a particularly persistent door-to-door salesman. "What *now*?"

"What happens, do you think," Abraytha asked, "if I were to trigger my powers of renewal, right now? Unmake and remake myself. Right this second."

Nous sucked in the word more than he pronounced it. "*What*?!"

"I've done it before," Abraytha insisted, with a cocky tilt of his head, as much as he was able, and he forced himself to grin. "I've done it with less at stake than the whole Gieakraal."

"Y-you wouldn't." Nous swallowed, and his next sentence was louder; a warning, uncertain, almost daring him. "It'd scatter you across eternity!"

Abraytha's smile was genuine, for just a moment, as he retorted: "But Xi would be safe."

He closed his eyes. Well, it was a good run; he'd done well, hadn't he? He just hoped she'd forgive him for leaving her like this. He breathed in —

— and the door burst open at the edge of the room, flying off its hinges and disintegrating in the swirl of broken possibilities that surrounded Abraytha.

Nous turned towards the door "How did you…?"

"Xiantio! Stay back, he's…"

"We know, we know everything," Zhei declared. Their eyes were daggers as they turned towards the Duke. "You lied to us."

Nous laughed, bitterly. "And you ate up every word, the proud and noble Dukes of Time, who wish to bestow their power upon you… how pathetic."

Zhei put their head down. *He was right*. But Reth stepped forwards.

"Not half as pathetic as *you*," she said.

"I'd not get any closer, if I were you, little bird. That maelstrom would eat you alive, like any *ordinary* being. Only a Duke of Time could possibly survive it." Nous waved the sceptre, before pointing it at Xiantio. "And *you*. You think I'm the monster? The liar, the deceiver? Your *friend* lied to you. Look at him. He's a Shambler, a monstrosity clad in a parody of form —"

"I *know* that Abraytha's half-vampire," Xiantio cut in, pulling Reth back and stepping forward in her stead. "Hell, *look* at him! He's a scary flying gargoyle-man, you don't need ancient lore to tell you *that*. And I don't *care*! Abraytha's Abraytha!"

"Then you're a bigger fool than I thought," Nous said, and turned back to Abraytha. "Try to save him, then. See what it gets you."

Xiantio took a breath; the chaos whisked right past her face, so close that if she took one more step it would consume her, she would fall forever, lost in eternity, lost alone. But Abraytha would be lost if she did nothing.

"You know, 'Your Grace'," said Abraytha, "I think you've overlooked something."

"Oh, *have* I?" The Duke of Time was trying to control his rage, but his nostrils were flaring. "And what, pray tell, is it this time?"

"Xiantio may not be of my kind, but make no mistake, she's *far* from ordinary." He grinned widely. "In *any* sense of the word."

Xiantio stepped into the maelstrom, disappearing into the shards of fractured time — immersing themselves in a flurrying storm made of remnants of broken worlds and peoples, all consumed by the weapon and thrown up as a defence against those who tried to interfere with its operation.

But she held on, even when bombarded by an eternity, even as it threatened to sweep her away again. She remembered the moment when, under the thrall of the false vampire back in its cathedral of mundanity, she'd finally seen Abraytha again and everything had become clear. He was theirs and they were his.

And they would not let some self-obsessed *failure* of an Archon take him away from them. They would not.

They were an Archon of Winter. A descendant of Satteurn. Their people had succeeded where this mockery had failed — bound the chaos and primal forces of an untamed Universe in rituals of snow and ice. And he would take from her the man whom she —

"*What*?!"

There was no control now, just a shout of fear and outrage. Nous stepped back in shock as the winds of time parted where Xiantio had been, and what could only be described as a blizzard swept through in their place, swirling around Nous and Abraytha. From the cold strode Xiantio, not quite human — ears stiff, claws bared, fangs small but sharp and *cold*.

Nous bared teeth of his own — flat and useless — and reached for a weapon on his belt, but Xiantio drove a claw across his chest before he could even touch it. As he cried out in pain, she kicked his weapon away into the maelstrom as it consumed the pathway she had froze through it once more.

"What… are you?" Nous asked, clutching his chest as the blood gushed forth.

Xiantio lifted him up by the throat.

"I am *his*."

That was all the explanation they offered before crushing his throat and throwing him to the ground.

"Woah Xi, that was… I mean… thank you," Abraytha managed to sputter out.

Xiantio leapt up onto the reactor and cut Abraytha free from his bindings, pulling him to safety.

Then she hugged him. "I was worried for a moment, that it was too late, that he'd already have…"

"You stepped through a temporal maelstrom, for me?" Abraytha laughed, "I was wrong, you're as mad as I am."

The Scavenger and the Winterian embraced for a moment more, before a burst of light from the body of Nous called their attention. His broken form was glowing, rippling, its silhouette blurring like molten lava.

"Abraytha —"

"Yes."

"He's *healing*!"

"Just like an Archon," Abraytha snorted.

But he didn't seem concerned. Trusting his judgement, Xiantio simply watched as the process completed itself, as did the Ales-Vos. When the glow began to die away, Abraytha stepped forward.

* * *

When Nous came to, the first thing they noticed was that his blood-stained robes now fit him badly — them — no, *her*. She was a woman now — in a feminine embodiment, anyway — with long raven hair that hung in front of their face.

Hang on.

"What —"

That was the second thing the Duchess noticed. She was hanging upside-down over the reactor, with the Vampire's claws gripping her ankles like vices. Her robe wasn't ill-fitting; if anything she must be taller than before. But it, too, was now subject to gravity, and had bunched up at her shoulders. The ridiculousness of her position jarred with the mortal peril she knew herself to be in as the reactor blazed and churned below; the contrast only added to her rage.

"What do you think you're doing!?" she growled at the Vampire.

Abraytha was smiling, but there was something hard about that smile. Something determined. Not at all the kind of smile one wants to see on the face of a man who's dangling one by one's ankles over a doomsday device.

"Well, stop me if I'm wrong," he said, "but you said the arcane energies of a sacrificed resurrection would power up this machine and create a portal, right?"

Her heartbeat quickened.

"Now, I'm guessing — murderous, self-obsessed dictator like you — you made sure you had quite a *few* lives to spare."

"I am *immortal*!" she barked at him. "Release me!"

"How many times can you come back? Dozens? Hundreds? More than me, anyway, I'd wager. Won't save you from that thing, but this should work *much* better."

"No. No! D-don't you dare!"

As she felt the danger increasing, Duchess Nous began to struggle in earnest, tensing her legs uselessly — as if she had any hope of wrenching her ankles free of her executioner's grip; as if it would do her any good even if she *did* manage it, given that the gaping maws of the deadly machine were right beneath her. She saw Abraytha's expression harden yet further and panicked, arms flailing uselessly; her mind raced desperately for something to say that might sway the monster, and found nothing.

"No! No — you wouldn't — no —"

"No idea where it'll go with *your* biodata to power it — but hey, not knowing's half the fun. Right, Xi?"

Xiantio nodded with a fierce smile, baring cold white fangs.

"You *can't* —" the Duchess screamed, and, midway through the second word, realised the pressure around her ankles was gone.

And then there was pain.

* * *

Abraytha had dropped her before she could finish. He looked up at Xiantio and the two Ales-Vos; Reth was covering her eyes with a wing, with Zhei holding her other feathered hand. Abraytha got the sense that the Professor's stare, though it was not true disapproval, held a challenge, a question. He simply shrugged, and said:

"She didn't deserve last words."

There was a burst of light and sound, muffled within the machine, as Nous's resurrection kicked off again — then another, then another —

And behind Abraytha and Xiantio, space itself wrenched open into a tear between worlds.

Abraytha's voice was still serious as he turned to his companion.

"You really *don't* have the first idea where this goes," he remarked. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"You *said* this was the fun of it." Xiantio took Abraytha's hand. "So long as we are together."

Abraytha grinned and the two stepped through the tear, disappearing from one reality and leaving for another.

* * *

The tear didn't collapse all at once. That would have been too convenient, too picture-perfect. Zhei and Reth watched the swirling, shimmering light for a few long minutes, half-expecting their friends to run back out at any moment, complaining that the random coordinates had taken them somewhere completely unlivable, or in the middle of a warzone, or back to the Void.

But there was nothing. After a while — the Professor counted three hundred and fifty death-flashes in all — a final, agonised scream echoed from inside the machinery; they couldn't discern the gender. Instantly the blinking diodes faded and the roar of thrumming metal died down. The maelstrom seemed almost to fly apart; then the inside was consumed in darkness, and the chaos dissipated in a matter of seconds, unraveling into nothing.

Reth ran up to the device, but any trace of the vortex was gone, and so were Xiantio and Abraytha, and so was Nous. All that was left was an unassuming clockwork box.

Zhei put a hand on Reth's shoulder. "They're gone."

Reth turned over to them. "But did they win?"

"I don't suppose we'll ever know, but whatever happened, the Dukes of Time are extinct," Zhei said solemnly. "Now and forever."

"Yeah…" said Reth, still uncertain. Then she frowned and waved a hand. "Well, good riddance."

"Oh yes," Zhei admitted, "certainly. It's a pity it had to be done, but I can't say I'll actually *mourn* them."

"Mind you…" Reth said after a while. "I think it's about time someone *new* took charge. I've been thinking about what Xiantio said. How our laws of physics were a mess, and that's what sent us hurtling towards some kind of super-heated collapse in the far future."

Zhei blinked, eyes widening. "You can't *actually* be suggesting…"

"Hey," Reth replied, shrugging cheekily, "Nous may have *thought* he was lying — Eyne knows he didn't mean for things to turn out like this, but he *did* leave everything to you in the end. To you and me. All that equipment, those records…"

Zhei began to pace about, fizzing with possibility and containing a laugh of sheer exhilaration. "Well, now, Reth, decoding the instructions would be a task only fit for a cosmic archaeologist of the highest caliber… And even such a person couldn't *possibly* do it alone…"

Reth made a show of standing at attention, grinning. "Just say the word, Professor."

Zhei smiled back at Reth, then they pointed back to the door.

"Get the equipment, Reth! We've got a job to do, and by Eyne, we're going to do it!"